



Arizona's Conservation Districts:

A Long History of Locally Led Landowner Conservation

Stefanie Smallhouse, Executive Director, Arizona Natural Resource Conservation Districts State Association

Going Green is the catch phrase for this next generation. Our kids today are learning about recycling, water conservation, carbon emissions, and solar energy as part of a core curriculum. However, natural resource conservation has been a factor in the lives of America's farmers and ranchers for decades; In Arizona, over 67 years to be exact. But, to appreciate where we are, we must be aware of our past.

April 14, 1935 marked the culmination of the period known as "The Dust Bowl." Black Sunday will be known forever in our history as the day of the worst dust storm ever recorded. For ten years, the dust blew over the barren, drought stricken grasslands of the Great Plains. There were no native grasses or crops to hold down the soil and the irrigation

that we use today to water crops had yet to be developed. Farming and ranching families were literally living through a hell on earth. Between the suffering of the Great Depression and the choking dust that killed and entered every crack in their lives these people refused to give up. Luckily, over 80% of them stayed in the area hoping for rain, fields of green, and clean air.

This was our country's worst ecological disaster in history. By 1937 more than three-fourths of the topsoil had been lost from 8,543,000 acres. It was that same Sunday storm in 1935 that left a layer of Panhandle dust across the desk of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Up until that time the rest of the country, to include our lawmakers and President, were totally preoccupied with the economic crash and had little sympathy or understanding of what was happening to the west of the Mississippi. Shortly thereafter, Congress unanimously passed legislation declaring soil and water conservation a national policy and priority. It was a defining moment in time when America's government and its farmers realized that food production and westward settlement could not take place at the expense of our most valuable resources.

President Roosevelt created the Soil Conservation Service (USDA, renamed in 1994 to Natural Resource Conservation Service), a federal agency, to disburse program funding and provide technical assistance to farmers. This enabled immediate projects that with the help of rain ended the enormous loss of America's soil and forever changed cultivation practices for the better.

The President also requested of all the states that they enact legislation allowing local landowners to form Soil Conservation Districts to work closely with the NRCS and bridge the gap of mistrust that had developed over the past decade between the farmer and the Federal Government. This was necessary because nearly three fourth's of the U.S. was privately owned and Congress realized that only active, voluntary support from landowners would ensure that conservation of our natural resources would be successful. There is no other landowner/federal agency partnership in existence that works so effectively. Over the decades Conservation Districts have served as the vehicle for local leadership, landowner empowerment, and generations of stewardship knowledge, while partnering with the NRCS to turn federal dollars and programs into actual on the ground conservation.

Arizona's Soil Conservation District enabling act was passed in 1941. At that time only croplands were included but by 1954 all lands were included in the enabling act. Arizona has 41 Conservation Districts blanketing the entire state. The majority of the Districts encompass rural areas and now go by the name Natural Resource Conservation Districts (NRCD), still focusing on conservation practices for agricultural lands. These districts are legal sub-divisions of state government and are governed by locally elected landowners who serve as Supervisors and continue to manage districts for their original intent: "to provide for the restoration and conservation of lands and soil resources of the state, the preservation of water rights and the control and prevention of soil erosion, and thereby to conserve natural resources, conserve wildlife, protect the tax base..." (ARS Title 37, Chapter 6). Supervisors are able to do this through determining the resource conservation needs of the District, developing and coordinating long-range plans and programs of natural resource conservation, and implementing them under the District's annual plan of operations.

Conservation Districts facilitate disbursement of federal conservation program funding through education, technical assistance, and funding/project prioritization. These voluntary landowner driven conservation efforts also include working with all entities, government or private, responsible for natural resources management. District activities

include, but are not limited to: flood control projects, rangeland monitoring assistance, watershed assessments, wildlife habitat improvement projects and education, irrigation management, alternative energy education and assistance, archaeological site preservation, and conservation education workshops for producers. Conservation Districts also manage Environmental Education Centers that focus on straight forward science based environmental education for adults and children. Their work also incorporates how conservation plays an important role in agriculture and the way that our food and fiber is produced.

Conservation at this level is vital as the farmers and ranchers managing the land surrounding Arizona's urban areas ensure that water comes out of the tap and food is on the dinner table. However, today there are more homes than farm fields and livestock pastures in many districts. This requires that Conservation Districts consider conservation planning, priorities, and education for the needs of residential landowners as well.

If you are not currently involved with your Conservation District and would like to be, or need information regarding a natural resource issue please consider contacting a Supervisor from your District. District meetings are open to the public and agendas are posted at

least 24 hours in advance of the meeting in a designated location. To find contact information for your district go to the Arizona State Land Department's website www.land.state.az.us and click on "Directory of Supervisors" located under the Natural Resources Tab: Conservation Districts. For information regarding the Tribal Soil and Water Conservation Districts contact Stefanie Smallhouse, Executive Director for the Arizona Natural Resource Conservation Districts State Association @ 520-850-8250.

Since 1935 we have made great strides in land and water management through conservation minded actions. We have not experienced a natural resource disaster like that of the "Dirty Thirties" since the creation of the Conservation Districts and the invaluable Natural Resource Conservation Service. The most successful conservation efforts in our Country's history have been led and carried out through the voluntary, self-motivated actions of those that live close to the land. This is the tradition established by Conservation Districts. Consider being a part of it!

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